

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL DAN BALL, COMMANDER, COMBAT AVIATION BRIGADE, 3RD INFANTRY DIVISION SUBJECT: CAPABILITIES OF THE AVIATION BRIGADE MODERATOR: CHARLES J. "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 11:00 A.M. EST DATE: THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2007

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MR. HOLT: Colonel Ball, if you're ready, I'd like to welcome you to the Bloggers Roundtable.

Colonel Dan Ball, the commander of the Combat Aviation Brigade, from the 3rd Infantry Division is with us this morning.

Thank you, sir, for joining us. Do you have an opening statement for us, sir?

COL. BALL: Well, I do have a short statement for you. Welcome everybody, I appreciate this opportunity. As mentioned, my name is Colonel Dan Ball, and I've been commanding the Combat Aviation Brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division for about a year and a half now. It is my third rotation to Iraq, and I've also spent some time in Afghanistan. But I want to give you a quick run-down on what our capabilities are as the Aviation Brigade, and then open it up to questions by all who are on the net today. Hopefully, I can answer them. As you know, I can only answer those questions that are unclassified, but I'll do the very best I can to talk around any issues that might be sensitive in nature.

Again, we are out of Hunter Army Airfield down in Savannah, and part of the 3rd Infantry Division. As a brigade, overall, this is the third deployment by this Combat Aviation Brigade in-theatre, the most by any aviation brigade in our Army.

We are 128 helicopters strong, and it's broken down into five different battalions. Our 1st Battalion is our Apache Longbow Battalion. I have 24 Longbow Apaches who are fielded with the most modern M-TAD sensor in the Army. Currently there are two battalions fielded that way. And we have one of them.

And we also have my 2nd Battalion which is a General Support battalion. And as such, it has a Command-and-Control Company of eight Blackhawks; it has a Chinook Company of 12 Chinooks; a MEDEVAC Company of 12 MEDEVAC helicopters. It also has an ATC, Air Traffic Control company. And then again, I've been task organized with an additional MEDEVAC Company out of the Indiana National Guard, the 2nd of the 238th, a very good outfit.

I have a 3rd Battalion, which is not really a battalion, it's a Cav squadron. And they are fielded with the Kiowa Warrior. It is a reconnaissance helicopter, I have 30 of those. They're a much smaller helicopter than the Apache, more lightly-armed, but their ability to conduct cavalry operations, i.e., reconnaissance and security, with their on-board sensors, is better than the Apache. And so it provides us a much balanced -- much more balanced approach than some of the other combat aviation brigades that come over here that are fielded with either all Kiowa's or all Apaches.

My 4th Battalion is a UH-60 Air Assault battalion. It has 30 UH- 60s in it, and we conduct everything from, like I said, air assaults to logistics support across the Division's battlespace.

And then my 5th Battalion is my Maintenance Battalion. They do the majority of my scheduled maintenance. They also do the majority of our ground maintenance, our commo, and other logistics functions inside the brigade.

Since we've been in-theatre, we have -- we have flown a little over -- (audio interference) --

COL. BALL: What?

MR. HOLT: Okay, we had a little -- COL. BALL: Is something wrong?

MR. HOLT: No, we just had a little cross-talk going on there. Go ahead, sir.

COL. BALL: Okay. We are part of the surge force. I know that when it was spoke about last spring -- five BCTs coming over to Iraq as a surge force, nobody really thought about the additional enablers that would be required to support those five brigades.

And the first enabler was, of course, the Division Headquarters, and that's the 3rd Infantry Division, which is task organized as a MNDC, Multi-National Division Center Headquarters, and that's my boss, Major General Rick Lynch. And he was told to come over here and provide command-and-control for the five surge BCTs. And before he accepted that job, the first words out of his mouth were, hey, I'm not going anywhere unless I have my Combat Aviation Brigade. And that's how we got tasked to come over here a little more than 60 days early.

We arrived in May. We were fully combat operational two days early. We were supposed to be combat ready by the 15th of June, and we were operational on the 13th of June, and stepped right off into a major division level operation. Since that time, a little bit more than six months, we've flown over 66,000 hours. We have killed over 265 of the enemy, which equates to about 70 percent of the enemy killed in action for the 3rd Infantry Division since we've been here.

It includes well over 100 vehicles, 157 boats, about 170 other different structures, and 38 weapons systems that range anywhere from anti-aircraft weapons systems, to artillery weapons systems. Inside of BIAPS, we've moved almost 80,000 personnel across the battlefield with our Chinook and UH-60 helicopters, and moved over 12 million pounds of cargo. And what's significant about both those numbers is, as you well know, one of the major threats in-theatre is the IED threat. And if I can move 77,000 soldiers and almost 12

million pounds of cargo, I'm keeping vehicles and soldiers off the roads, which is inherently making it more safe for our soldiers.

And then last, before I open it up to questions, I'll tell you that because of the terrain that we're in, which is really the southern belt in Baghdad, it's a much more different fight than inside the city, or even up north, for that matter, in some of the major cities up there. We have a very open agriculture-type terrain that we operate in, cross-cut by many different canal systems. And because of that, ground mobility is tough.

And what we're able to do with our UH-60 helicopters is provide the Division that mobility required by the ground forces to get from point A to point B. And we do that through the means of air assaults. And since we've been here, in six months we've conducted over a 120 of these air assaults to kill or capture the enemy in our area of operations. So with that, sir, that's my opening statement. I'll -- I'll leave it to questions. I've done one of these before and I know, Jack, that you've got it under control and I'll just stop right here and let you call on whoever you want to to ask the questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

And Richard Lowry, you were first on the line, so why don't you get us started.

Q Hi, this is Richard Lowry from op-for.com. Just a simple question for you, how are your aircraft holding up?

COL. BALL: Well, they're actually holding up well, and I'll tell you why. I commanded an attack helicopter battalion during OIF I. And obviously, during OIF I we did not have a robust infrastructure over here, and I slept on the wing of my helicopter. And I flew it from a dirt pad to another dirt pad, and at the end of the day I was still on the dirt. And that really kills our maintenance.

But the situation that I'm in here now, we are actually stationed on BIAP, Baghdad International Airport, and so every day my attack helicopters launch from a -- from the hard stand, and they come back to a hard stand.

Really, the only helicopters I have that are operating in, quote, unquote, "a dirty environment," are my lift helicopters -- well, when they do their air assaults, obviously, and also my Chinooks, because I use Chinooks quite frequently on air assaults, which is a TTP that many of the other aviation brigades before us haven't done, but it really helps build combat power on the objective rapidly. However, we go to our LZs, which are unimproved, but we're able to come back to a hard stand and to conduct maintenance.

One of the other things I'd tell you is we have some civilian contractors over here to augment us with our maintenance. We do that because of the OPTEMPO that we're flying at. I'm currently flying my Apaches at about a little over 90 hours per platform, per month; my KWs about 100; my UH-60s 70; my Chinooks about 60. And that's about seven -- five to seven times what we fly in garrison.

And because of that -- we're not manned to fly that much, but it's a demand placed on us by the ground forces, because they're not able to accomplish a lot without their aviation in the air providing protection and moving them and

resupplying them across the battlefield. So we're integrated with some blue-suit contract maintenance that's allowing us to help maintain our helicopters.

MR. HOLT: All right.

And, Jim.

Q Hey, sir, I've got -- I've got a question for you about, I guess, what your biggest threats are, to your aircraft. We've heard a lot about IEDs and EFPs coming in from Iran, and the difficulties there. If I was commanding an aviation unit, I'd be more concerned about shoulder-fired, surface-to-air missiles. And I'm just curious if you guys if you guys have seen that as a threat to your aircraft.

COL. BALL: Sure it is a threat, but it's not the biggest threat to us. Right now in-theater, the biggest threat to us is the small arms and heavy machine guns. We take about -- oh, I'd say I'd average about two SAFIRE events a day -- a 24-hour period, when we're flying, that's surface-to-air fires. And I will tell you that I probably average one to two helicopters hit a month. We've had seriously damaged -- we've an AH-64 twice; I've had three Kiowas and one Blackhawk that have required some battlefield repairs lasting longer than about three days. So I'd say, you know, three to five days down- time to do some sheetmetal work and replace some parts.

And most of those have all been heavy machine gun. So that's the threat. And we counter our threat by our TTPs. We obviously have, for some of the weapons systems you're talking about, aircraft survivability equipment, which is the best that can be fielded right now, and it's really done a lot to enhance our survivability. But for the iron sites (ph), the small arms and the machine gun threat, it's basically our tactics on the battlefield, and then some of our TTPs that we use in order to help us negotiate those type of threats. And I don't really want to get into those TTPs, but we've been doing a pretty good job.

MR. HOLT: Great.

Okay, Jarred.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for your time. Could you talk -- you mentioned the air assault. I guess it was the battalion or the brigade. And we've seen reports about the Iraqis being engaged in certain air assaults. Can you talk about that, if there are plans to increase the training on them, for them to be able to take over their own air assault missions?

COL. BALL: Well, I don't really deal with the training of the Iraqi air force, if you will -- both rotary-wing and fixed-wing. Now they are training, and we do hear him -- hear them on the radio as they're flying about the battlespace, and they do have a rotary-wing force.

I would tell you that, as the 3rd Combat Aviation Brigade, we are always doing Coalition operations with the Iraqi security forces. We did an air assault this morning. And as such, we air assaulted in elements our 4th Brigade -- the Vanguard Brigade out of Fort Stewart, Georgia. And along with them, went a platoon of Iraqi army.

I also do operations with Special Forces. I assault those guys in when required. And they are always working with Iraqi special forces. So as far as

the Iraqi army, they are getting training on how to use helicopters for assault operations, as they work with American ground forces.

As far as training Iraqi pilots, that's -- that's not part of my mission essential task list, and I don't get involved with that at all.

MR. HOLT: Okay, any other follow-up questions?

Q I would have a follow-up then.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sure. Go ahead. Q Can you talk a little bit about -- since you've been there for three -- this is your third tour, sir, talk a little bit about your impressions about what's changed from the first time and the second time in to now, this third time?

COL. BALL: Well, a lot of the changes have to do with the terrain that we're in, and then with the enemy threat that you face, and then with the political situation. So I'll address all three of those, starting first with the enemy. Obviously, during OIF I we were facing a state-sponsored army. And we were doing it on the move, in an austere environment, and we were using tactics, techniques and procedures that we'd been training for years, against a mobile armored threat.

And it worked quite well. I mean, everybody can harken back to 203 (2003 ?), when we were -- we were doing that. So that -- so I'll use that as a baseline, and then tell you that the last time the brigade was here, they fought in Baghdad. And it was a urban environment. And that, in itself, caused a lot of -- a lot of different solution sets to different problems. We started operating in smaller formations, from an aviation perspective. From OIF I, we were operating in a platoon, or company-type formations when we went out to fight a standing enemy, if you will.

During OIF III, when the brigade was here fighting in a urban environment, you weren't seeing those large stand-up formations, you were seeing much smaller groups conducting small, hit-and-run tactics, terrorist tactics, and it required the Aviation Brigade to adapt. And what they did was they started operating in teams of two, with a lot of their attack helicopters and their scout helicopters.

You saw a much larger role with your logistics helicopters as far as moving equipment and supplies across the battlefield, mainly because we had more soldiers here, more contractors here, and more civilians here, and required more of that, so a much larger role for your support helicopters. This time around, we're still using the same TTPs, teams of two, or eventually how we're fighting this operation, but we are now, like I said, in the southern belt and the terrain's more open, and the distance is much greater between our logistical hub. And so I'm finding that our flights are a lot longer and we're starting to fly a lot more at altitude, which is one of the things that we're doing to combat small arms fire.

And our threat is probably about the same as it was the last time. We do have (accelerants ?) from both predominantly religious groups, both Sunni and Shiite extremists, and we have a lot of criminal element that we're dealing with as well. So the sophistication of the weaponry are not out there, but it's a thinking enemy. And they adapt quite well to what we're doing on a daily basis. And I can tell you, from when we got here six months ago to what we're doing now, has changed -- not drastically, but it has changed four or five degrees in

how we operate just base on trying to stay ahead of the enemy and what he's doing as far as operations. But the terrain has changed quite a bit. And I will tell you that right now the Iraqi people themselves are really starting to take sides. And the side that they're taking is the side of the Coalition. They are seeing that, with the surge forces being over here, and our capability to not only clear terrain and destroy the enemy, which we've always had the capability to do, but now we've got the capabilities to hold on to that terrain and stay.

And by staying in their neighborhoods and in their cities, and in their villages, they're starting to know us; they're starting to be comfortable with us; they're starting to realize that we're there to make their life better. And because of that, they're starting to take our side and we're getting a lot more tips, a lot more information about the remaining enemy. And it starts becoming cyclic, because the more we know about the enemy, the more we're able to target them, the more we're able to kill them, the safer they feel, the more information we get, not only about the enemy, then about caches.

And you have a phenomenon over here right now called "Concerned Local Citizens," where these guys -- almost like our Neighborhood Watches back home in the United States, they are manning check-points, if you will, at the crossroads in their cities, making sure that their streets are safe at night and during the day. So they're really taking our side against al-Qaeda over here, and I think it's something that we can be proud of as an army, and we can be proud of as a nation. MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you, sir.

Sir, Colonel Ball, I have a question for you. Aviation being a very training intensive type of operation, are there any changes in training that you're seeing, or that you need to see incorporated into the lessons -- I mean, the lessons learned in training and -- incorporated into training for future ops?

COL. BALL: The answer to that is -- it is, yes. And, of course, the follow-on is okay, what do you see? I think one of the biggest things that we're learning over here is we have probably some of the best equipment in the world. I don't think anybody would argue that.

But there are still limitations as to what you can do: Power management is still critical, especially in the summertime around here for a lot of our platforms; and teaching guys to fly in those austere environments; and then with a full load of munitions, if you're an attack guy; or with a full load of combat soldiers in the back of your helicopter, it makes a big difference.

And then as you -- as you learn that TTP, then there's a lot of difference between flying straight and level, than it is when you're out trying to fly certain formations -- formations is probably the wrong word, flying certain types of envelopes, if you will, to present yourself as the smallest possible picture to the enemy on the ground.

And, you know, that's like any other training base, you only train the basics at flight school. And what you don't get is a fully-trained pilot when you get to your unit because you still have to do your mission tasks. So the flip side is, the beauty is, you're learning your mission task in combat, and there's no better school than combat to learn your mission task.

So we are seeing some changes, and I think some of our young soldiers that are going back to be instructors -- especially some of our young warrant

officers, going back to Fort Rucker to teach, will start teaching those different TTPs to our young kids going through flight school. And it we're going to have a better group of -- crop of pilots coming through. MR. HOLT: All right, thank you, sir.

Any other follow-up questions?

Q I don't have a question so much, sir, as just a belated thanks from somebody who, when they asked me what I miss from being in the Army, I tell them free bullets and helicopter rides.

COL. BALL: (Laughs.)

Q -- (inaudible) -- for every one of those I ever got.

COL. BALL: Yes, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Well, Colonel Ball, thank you for being with us today. Do you have any closing thoughts for us, closing comments?

COL. BALL: I'll tell you what, I think I'll close with what I ended up stating just a minute ago. We haven't won anything over here, but we are starting to win the Iraqi local population. And we're doing that, I think, because we're out there holding on to the terrain.

It's one thing to defeat the enemy -- and I don't think anybody would argue that that's what we do best, but our capability now with the surge force, to not only defeat the enemy but then to stay in the neighborhoods and help in more of the non-kinetic LOOs, lines of operation, if you will, for a LOO -- like governance; like getting their economy going; building; cleaning out; helping them, showing them the way to get their irrigation working again; opening up their shops.

Those kind of things are all building upon themselves to create a more secure environment for the local population. And once the local population buys in, and their children feel safe to go back to school, they feel safe to walk the street and go to the market, then I think we're well on our way to having victory over here. And I believe it's happening because the American soldiers are here en force, and doing our jobs.

So I just want to thank you guys that are to there. And I want to thank the American population for supporting the soldiers. I know you guys -- most of you guys have served in the military and you know what it's like to be away from your families during the holidays. But if you could just see what I see over here now -- all the different boxes, packages, cards, letters, everything that the American population is sending over here to support their soldiers, I'm so proud I could pop. And I'll just leave it like that. Thank you, guys.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you, sir. Colonel Dan Ball with us, the commander of the Combat Aviation Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division. Thanks for being on the Bloggers Roundtable today.

COL. BALL: Okay, sir.

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